

Education as a Site of Domination and Liberation: Examining the Intersections of Race, Class, and Critical Pedagogy through History

Education has never been a neutral enterprise. Across history, it has evolved in response to political, economic, and cultural forces - functioning both as a product and a producer of social order. From colonial missions that entrenched racial hierarchies to neoliberal reforms that commodified learning, schooling has continually served to classify, discipline, and legitimise inequality under the guise of progress and merit. Yet within these same systems lie the seeds of transformation. This essay traces the historical evolution of schooling from its informal, community-based origins to the colonial, industrial, and neoliberal systems that dominate today. It examines how education became a tool for reproducing privilege through processes of classification - racial, psychological, and economic - shaped by broader power structures. It argues that while education has often been co-opted to sustain dominant ideologies, it also retains the transformative potential to foster justice through critical and decolonising pedagogies. By analysing examples ranging from colonial schooling and Indigenous education to modern neoliberal reforms, this discussion explores how race and class continue to intersect in shaping educational opportunity - and what is required to reimagine education as a genuinely democratic and emancipatory practice.

Before the establishment of formal schooling, education was largely informal - community-based, shaped by local customs, practical skills, and moral guidance from religious institutions. Learning occurred through family labour, trade, storytelling, and kinship networks, with knowledge oriented toward daily survival rather than employability or social mobility. As societies industrialised and colonial empires expanded, these informal and religious forms of learning gradually evolved into formal schooling systems shaped by state interests and economic imperatives. Education became a key mechanism for regulation, supervision, and moral instruction (Campbell & Proctor, 2014).

As European powers expanded their empires, these disciplinary principles became embedded within colonial schooling systems, where they were used to enforce both racial and social hierarchies. According to Tait (2012), the structure and curriculum of colonial schools left lasting social impacts, perpetuating stereotypical prejudices, oversimplifications, and ethnocentric views, particularly towards Indigenous communities. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were increasingly framed as a primitive “dying race,” and schooling policy reflected this fatalistic logic. From the late nineteenth century, separate “Aboriginal schools” were established under protectionist legislation, justified by the belief that Indigenous children could neither survive nor succeed within modern mainstream public education.

Even when Indigenous perspectives were superficially included in educational institutions, they were filtered through deficit discourses. The Australian Curriculum’s explanatory texts - intended to guide teachers - often portrayed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge systems as “lacking” or “in need of development” (Hughes & Fricker, 2024). When educators rely on such texts to interpret curriculum aims and content, these assumptions inevitably shape classroom practice, positioning Indigenous knowledge as inferior and incomplete.

Students exposed to such environments internalise these hierarchies, learning to measure their worth through Western epistemological standards. This process of “inclusion” thus becomes a subtle form of assimilation - reproducing the colonial logic of deficiency and conformity within modern schooling. Historical precedents of this mindset are evident in institutions such as London Missionary Society (LMS) schools across the Pacific, which removed Indigenous children from their families to train them in English literacy and manual labour, “removed from their evil surroundings and family influences,” moulding them into compliant workers and evangelists (Campbell & Proctor, 2014). Education thus functioned as a powerful instrument for normalising whiteness and defining “civilised” citizenship against an imagined Indigenous “other.”

As the twentieth century began, global education reformers led the progressive education movement. Within this broader movement, three strands emerged. The first two - child-centred pedagogy, which emphasised learning through experience and individual development, and social reconstructionism, which envisioned schooling as a means of building a more just and egalitarian society - reflected the ideals of the philosophical progressives (Kretchmar, 2024). Led by thinkers such as John Dewey and later Paulo Freire, they viewed education as a democratic, participatory practice aimed at cultivating reflective and socially engaged citizens, particularly among those oppressed by social and political systems. To combat illiteracy, discrimination, and blind obedience to authority, they promoted schools as open learning communities grounded in experience and dialogue. Dewey’s University of Chicago Laboratory Schools, for instance, embodied these ideals, positioning the classroom as a “miniature society” where children learned through doing and critically reflected on their shared experiences (Britannica Editors, 2013). Such schools sought to affirm the worth of every learner and promote education’s role in reconstructing society itself.

However, the third strand administrative progressivism soon came to dominate practice. This movement sought to apply the emerging methods of the social sciences to make schooling more efficient and measurable. Administrative reformers, described by Campbell and Proctor (2014) as the “testers, sorters, and selectors,” introduced large-scale medical inspections, standardised testing, IQ measurement, and psychological assessment to classify students and “rationalise” difference. Associated with figures such as Edward L. Thorndike, administrative progressivism applied the principles of scientific management to schooling. Under this system, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, working-class communities, and other marginalised groups were further disadvantaged as intelligence testing, ability grouping, and vocational streaming (Kretchmar, 2024) became tools for measuring “fitness” for citizenship. These mechanisms, presented as objective and fair, in fact entrenched existing hierarchies of race and class under the guise of merit. Aptitude testing and “scientific streaming” adapted curricula to students’ so-called natural abilities, reinforcing racial and class divisions. For example, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were disproportionately labelled as “deficient,” while a handful of white working-class students who scored well were showcased as proof of opportunity (Campbell & Proctor, 2014), legitimising a broader system of exclusion.

This transformation marked a critical turning point: education shifted from a democratic experiment to an instrument of classification and control. The overt racial and moral hierarchies of colonial education were rebranded in the neutral language of science, progress, and fairness. As Tait (2012) explains, modern schooling relied on processes of individuation, differentiation, and normalisation that shaped compliant citizens under the guise of progress.

In Australia, as Campbell and Proctor (2014) note, differential provision - the belief that different kinds of learners require different kinds of education - has long characterised the school system. Historically, this meant separation by race, gender, and class; under the influence of scientific management, intelligence and aptitude became the new indicators of worth. As the economy transitioned toward knowledge and service industries, these indicators were reframed around employability. Schools were now expected to produce “job-ready” citizens, aligning education with labour-market needs and stratifying students according to their perceived economic potential. This growing emphasis on human capital marked a shift in the purpose of education, from cultivating democratic participation to servicing economic growth.

By the late twentieth century, the logic of differentiation evolved into what Giroux (2022) calls “gangster capitalism”- or neoliberalism - which extended market principles beyond the economy into all spheres of life. Education, once regarded as a democratic public good, was reframed as a private investment aimed at producing employable, competitive individuals for the global market. Families were encouraged to navigate an education marketplace, competing for entry into “better” schools, while schools themselves became brands competing for enrolments. Those with greater economic and informational capital could “shop” for high-performing institutions, while under-resourced communities were left behind. Studies reveal a strong correlation between socio-economic status and school type, with non-government schools enrolling mostly privileged children and public schools enrolling the disadvantaged (Campbell & Proctor, 2014).

These hierarchies are reinforced through public rankings and standardised testing that legitimise inequality under the guise of merit. Federal initiatives such as NAPLAN and the My School website transformed education into a public scoreboard, privileging the linguistic and cultural capital of middle-class, English-speaking students. In Sydney, more than half of public-school students come from non-English-speaking backgrounds, compared with 37 per cent in Catholic and 22 per cent in independent schools (Tait, 2012). This ethnic and class-based segregation reflects the “flight” to private education, where wealthier families secure advantage under the rhetoric of choice.

The widening divide between public and private sectors has created a two-tiered schooling system stratified by postcode, income, and access. Housing near elite schools has become prohibitively expensive (France & Roberts, 2017), while high fees exclude Indigenous and low-income families. These inequalities are reinforced through capital itself - beginning with economic capital, which dictates where families live and which schools their children attend. Yet privilege extends far beyond wealth. Students from middle- and upper-class families possess cultural and social capital that advantage them in navigating education. Their cultural capital - expressed through forms of speech, dress, and comportment acquired via upper-class socialisation (Goldman & Scully, 2024) - signals status and aligns with the curriculum’s implicit values. Skills cultivated through “high-culture” pursuits such as art, music, and theatre - like interpreting Shakespeare, analysing art, or using sophisticated language - are disproportionately rewarded in elite schools and universities (Aedy, 2018). These are not neutral abilities but forms of legitimate culture that reflect and reproduce the tastes of the dominant wealthy class.

By contrast, students from working-class or marginalised backgrounds often lack access to these valued forms of capital and are concentrated in public schools that operate at what Polesel and Teese (1999) describe as “exposed sites,” where poverty, low parental education,

and limited digital access converge. With inadequate funding for literacy, numeracy, and student support, these schools struggle to close the gap. Consequently, students in low-SES schools perform on average nearly three years behind their affluent peers (Robinson, n.d.), and those from blue-collar or unemployed families face higher risks of early school leaving, restricted access to tertiary education, and long-term unemployment - paying the economic penalties of educational inequality (Polesel & Teese, 1999).

These dynamics sustain a pyramid-shaped education system that promotes an unequal distribution of benefits (Connell, 1993). A privileged few ascend - equipped with multiple forms of capital - while the majority remain disciplined, measured, and endlessly striving for mobility that the system itself denies. As Marshall (2002) observes, power within neoliberal schooling has become entrenched in mechanisms of domination, transforming education from a moral and democratic project into an instrument of economic governance. Even reforms presented as progressive often reproduce this instrumental logic. Initiatives such as “Asia literacy,” for instance, claim to promote cultural understanding but are primarily driven by economic and geopolitical interests - a continuation of colonial reasoning under neoliberal terms (Takayama, 2014). Similarly, in post-apartheid South Africa, elite universities preserved privilege under the rhetoric of equity by maintaining selective programs for high-achieving students while relegating others to separate “access” tracks (Naidoo, 2004). Neoliberalism thus repackages exclusion as fairness, embedding inequality within the very structure of schooling.

From its informal and communal origins to its transformation under colonial, industrial, and neoliberal regimes, education has continually mirrored the racial and class hierarchies of its time. What began as a moral and civic pursuit gradually became a mechanism of classification and competition - reproducing inequality through new vocabularies of progress and merit. Whether through the racial hierarchies of empire or the class hierarchies embedded in capitalist reform, schooling has too often legitimised privilege while disguising exclusion as fairness. Yet education has always retained the capacity to resist and transform, as seen through the philosophical progressivism movement and later traditions of critical pedagogy. Giroux’s (2022) vision of dialogue and consciousness-raising, for instance, calls educators to challenge dominant ideologies, racial biases, and class assumptions that normalise inequality. Similarly, Ethnic Studies programs born from civil rights movements reimagine classrooms as sites of justice - empowering students to interrogate race, power, and colonial legacies (Buller, 2025). Historically, education has been both a tool of colonial management and a vehicle for Indigenous agency - central to ongoing negotiations over cultural and racial difference, particularly as post-war decolonisation and Indigenous rights movements gave new voice to those once marginalised (McLeod & Paisley, 2023).

In Australia, realising such transformation requires confronting both racial and class-based inequities - guided by the Gonski Review’s call for equitable funding (Campbell & Proctor, 2014). As the review affirmed, the schools most in need were public schools, calling for reinvestment in disadvantaged communities and transparent, needs-based allocation. True reform also demands authentic partnership with First Nations and underrepresented groups - moving beyond token inclusion toward shared leadership and decolonial practice (Hughes & Fricker, 2024). This requires critical reflection on educators’ positionality, awareness of racial bias, and commitment to indigenising curricula. When consultation and leadership are meaningfully shared with relevant First Nations authorities, tokenism becomes almost impossible. Decolonising education, therefore, is not symbolic but structural - an ongoing relational and ethical process that redistributes power and redefines knowledge.

Echoing Mohism's vision of universal love and justice (Ho & Tseng, 2022), education must once again become an act of collective liberation - transforming knowledge not to reproduce the world as it is, but to imagine the world as it could be. Ultimately, democracy should not simply be taught in education but through it: as a living practice that connects pedagogy to freedom, equity, and the public good. Only by confronting the entwined legacies of race and class can schooling move beyond inherited hierarchies and become a genuine vehicle for justice and shared human flourishing.

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